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The future policy of Japan towards Asiatic countries should be similar to that of the United States towards their neighbors. . . . A "Japanese Monroe Doctrine" in Asia will remove the temptation to European encroachment, and Japan will be recognized as the leader of the Asiatic nations.

—President Theodore Roosevelt¹

The people of China well over a century have been, in thought and in objective, closer to us Americans than almost any other peoples in the world—the same great ideals. China, in the last—less than half a century has become one of the great democracies of the world.

—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt²

Two American presidents from the first half of the twentieth century blazed the path into Asia still followed by the United States today. These two presidents were cousins, and, although they lived a generation apart, both followed similar paths to power: from New York State legislator to assistant secretary of the Navy to New York governor and, finally, to president of the United States.

Both Presidents Roosevelt conducted their Asian diplomacy in similar style, personally taking the reins to deal directly and secretly with Asian affairs, often circumventing their own State Departments. Neither Roosevelt traveled to Asia or knew many Asians, but both were

THE CHINA MIRAGE



Presidents Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

supremely confident that they had special insights. The parallels are not exact. Theodore was enamored of Japan and allowed himself to be taken in by a propaganda campaign directed from Tokyo and led by a Harvard-educated Japanese friend. In contrast, Franklin favored China and was influenced by his own Harvard-educated Chinese friend.

Theodore Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing the combatants in the Russo-Japanese War to the peace table. Almost unknown in the United States, though, are the president's backdoor negotiations with Emperor Meiji of Japan over the fate of an independent country, the empire of Korea. During these secret talks, brokered by Meiji's Harvard-educated envoy, Roosevelt agreed to stand aside and allow Japan to subjugate Korea as a colony, becoming the first world leader to sanction Japan's expansion onto the Asian continent.

Sumner Welles, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's friend and the assistant secretary of state, observed, "No one close to the President could have failed to recognize the deep feeling of friendship for China that he had inherited from his mother's side of his family."³ After a meeting to discuss China policy with FDR, one administration official recalled,

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“We might as well have saved our breath. Roosevelt put an end to the discussion by looking up and recalling that his ancestors used to trade with China.”⁴

Indeed they had. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s grandfather Warren Delano was one of the first Americans to travel to what was seen by Americans as “Old China,” where he made a dynastic fortune in the illegal opium trade. As a U.S. consul, Delano oversaw the first American military incursion into China. It was from his Delano line that Roosevelt inherited his love of the sea, his princely fortune, and his confidence that he knew how to handle China. Roosevelt later observed, “What vitality I have is not inherited from Roosevelts . . . mine, such as it is, comes from the Delanos.”⁵

Dealing drugs was only part of Warren Delano’s mission. Much as his European ancestors had carved “New England” territory from Indian lands on America’s Atlantic coast, he helped carve “New



*Warren Delano, Hong Kong, 1860 (CPA Media /
Pictures from History)*

China" enclaves—westernized and Christianized areas—like Hong Kong on China's Pacific coast. Delano, like many Americans, believed that this was only the beginning, that just as they were sweeping across North America, someday Christian and American values would change China.

Like most Americans, the Roosevelts had only a meager understanding of Asia. Waves of immigration had brought people from all over the world to the United States, but after the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made it illegal for a Chinese person to enter the country. True, some westernized Chinese were exempted and allowed in as students, businessmen, and diplomats, but they were few and far between. Almost no Chinese could be found in the halls of the White House or the offices of Wall Street.

Likewise, very few Americans had ever traveled to China. Yes, some American missionaries, businessmen, and diplomats made it across the Pacific, but they clung mostly to the westernized New China settlements on the coast. These Americans wrote home about a cultural and spiritual blossoming of the Chinese under their care, decades of hopeful hogwash foisted on unknowing readers. Both Presidents Roosevelt were thus constantly well informed about New China, that place that was always going to be.

This book examines the American perception of Asia and the gap between that perception and reality. The wide gulf of the Pacific Ocean has prevented Americans and Chinese from knowing each other. Generations of accumulated misunderstanding between these two continental giants has so far led to three major Asian wars that have left millions dead and has distorted U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy.

My father, John Bradley, was one of the six men photographed raising the American flag on the island of Iwo Jima during World War II. When I was forty-six years old I published *Flags of Our Fathers*, a book about my dad's experiences. Now I am sixty years old and I

continue to honor the young men who fought in that horrible war, but I increasingly doubt my father's elders, the men in power who allowed Americans to be sucked into a world war at a time when the U.S. military was preparing for war in Europe and was not ready to fight in distant Asia.

Japan surprised the United States at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On December 8, the U.S. Congress declared war against Japan, but not well remembered is what Americans on that day thought they were fighting *for*. One of the millions who served in America's Asian war was John F. Kennedy, who later recalled,

It was clearly enunciated that the independence of China... was the fundamental object of our Far Eastern policy... that this and other statements of our policies on the Far East led directly to the attack on Pearl Harbor is well known. And it might be said that we almost knowingly entered into combat with Japan to preserve the independence of China.⁶

For generations, American hearts had been warmed by the missionary dream of a New China peopled by Americanized Christians. Then, beginning slowly in the early 1930s, a foreign-funded China Lobby sprouted in the United States and gained powerful adherents in the U.S. government, in the media, and in pulpits across the country. By 1941, nearly a decade of China Lobby propaganda had been pumped into American churches, homes, and heads, convincing the vast majority of Americans that a Christianized and Americanized New China would blossom as their best friend in Asia if the United States drove the Japanese military out of China.

The China Lobby's premise was that the Japanese military would be forced to withdraw from China if the United States embargoed Japan's oil. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt thought the opposite. Japan — with little domestic production — had only two major sources of oil: California and the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia). Roosevelt had a "Europe first" policy in case of war: the United States would defeat Hitler, and then, if necessary, confront the Japanese. Since the United States was supplying over 80 percent of Japan's oil,

FDR thought that if he cut off the California pump, the Japanese military would thrust south toward the Dutch East Indies, and the United States would be drawn into an unwanted Asian war.

Many administration officials were outraged by what they considered to be Roosevelt's appeasement of Japan. They — like the majority of Americans — had swallowed the China Lobby line that an oil embargo would force Japan out of China and that there would be no danger of the United States getting involved militarily. And with the Japanese no longer a threat, the great Chiang Kai-shek would ascend to undiluted command — and a Christian and democratic China would follow. (British prime minister Winston Churchill called the New China dream the "Great American illusion.")

This is the story of how a few of these officials surreptitiously outmaneuvered and undermined the president of the United States and thrust America into an unwanted Asian war. My father and millions of others fought in a conflict that didn't have to happen, a war that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was trying to avoid, one that could have been prevented or delayed if some overconfident administration officials had heeded their president instead of the China Lobby.

Today, seventy years after World War II, many imagine America went to war against Hitler to save England. History books and a recent television series on the Roosevelts recall the fierce tussle between American isolationists and internationalists in the lead-up to World War II, showing a fiery Charles Lindbergh and other public figures debating what the United States should do across the Atlantic. These stories feature a bold FDR reaching out to Winston Churchill via secret private emissaries like Harry Hopkins, Averell Harriman, and Wild Bill Donovan.

Little noted is that the debate about America's helping Britain was never decided. The U.S. did not enter World War II to defend Britain or oppose Hitler. On December 8, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan and only Japan. Three long days passed, and the United States did not declare war on Germany to defend England. It was only when Adolf Hitler rashly declared war on the U.S. that Americans went to war in Europe.

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World War II burst upon America from Asia. Charles Lindbergh's Atlantic focus is better remembered, but it was the China Lobby's arguments about peoples across the Pacific that changed American history.

When Mao Zedong rose to power in 1949, the U.S. government and media portrayed him as an angry, anti-American Soviet pawn, going so far as to paint Mao as not a "real Chinese," an idea believable because Americans had for decades been propagandized by the China Lobby that authentic Chinese yearned to be Christianized and Americanized. The American public did not realize that five years earlier, Mao had repeatedly extended his hand in friendship, enthusiastically describing to his State Department interlocutors a symbiotic relationship combining U.S. industrial know-how with China's limitless workforce. Mao—who had never flown in an airplane—reached out to President Roosevelt in 1945, saying he was eager to fly to the United States to discuss his vision, a historic opportunity that New China-believing Americans tragically nipped in the bud.

When the U.S.-spurned Mao turned to the USSR, Americans imagined they had lost China, and the United States replanted its New China dream on the island of Taiwan. Senator Joseph McCarthy asked, "Who lost China?" and launched a witch hunt—supported by the China Lobby—that drove the State Department specialists who had dealt with Mao out of the government. Having made itself blind on Asia, Washington then stumbled into the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

The who-lost-China hysteria helped topple the administration of President Harry Truman, distorted U.S. domestic politics, and haunted Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon as these presidents tried not to lose again in Asia.

The China Lobby also warped U.S. foreign policy. From 1949 to 1979, the world's most powerful country refused to have official state-to-state relations with the world's most populous country. But consider your smartphone, which was probably manufactured in China, and you can see that Mao's vision of the relationship—not America's New China dream—is the one that triumphed. Like World

War II in the Pacific, the destructive thirty years of estrangement between Mao's China and the United States did not have to happen.

The Roosevelts' actions in Asia are relatively unknown to Americans, even though the results are clear.

Go to New York City's Chinatown and you'll see the only two statues that Chinese Americans have erected there: one for the revered Confucius and the other for the Chinese government official who asked Warren Delano to stop smuggling opium into China.

Stroll through Seoul, South Korea, and you will come across a memorial honoring an American civilian, the only such statue in downtown Seoul. In 1905, the emperor of Korea had felt the Japanese military's hands tightening around his country's neck. He dispatched an American friend from Seoul to Washington to plead with President Theodore Roosevelt for Korea's continued independence. Roosevelt refused to help. Korea then fell under Japan's control for forty years. Today Koreans honor the American who begged Theodore Roosevelt for Korea's freedom.

Go to South Asia today, look up at the Pakistani sky, and you might see an American drone. The American president controls this lethal program within the executive branch; it's a private air force that's operated with little congressional oversight. Franklin Delano Roosevelt created this secret executive air force one year *before* Pearl Harbor in an attempt to keep the New China dream alive.

Today the United States is the world's largest developed country and China is the largest developing country. Like two huge balloons in a closed room, they will inevitably bump up against each other. The reactions will depend on each side's understanding of and empathy for the other. This is a book about the American disaster in Asia as a result of a mirage in the American mind. The stakes in understanding these past missteps are enormous and, to me, personal. My father was severely wounded in 1945, and in 1968 my brother almost died, both fighting in Asian wars that didn't have to happen. I don't want my son

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in boot camp like his grandfather and uncle simply because of more misunderstandings between the Pacific's two great powers.

Today, the United States and China—while cooperating to build wealth—are once again massively uninformed about each other. There was a time when everyone in the United States knew that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were China's top leaders and everyone in China recognized President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. A measure of the current relationship is that almost no Americans can name the top two Chinese leaders today and ninety-year-old Henry Kissinger remains China's most recognizable American friend.

With only a narrow, rickety bridge of fellowship crossing the Pacific, misunderstandings are flourishing and both countries employ heated rhetoric. On the American side, generations of missionary dreams about New China created an assumption in the United States about a reality that never existed in Asia. The China mirage took hold in the nineteenth century, affected U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics in the twentieth century, and continues to misguide America. Perhaps the cautionary tale revealed in this book will motivate people in both countries to strengthen that bridge across the Pacific before it's too late. Again.